ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE 1-D

WASHINGTON TIMES
3 March 1987

CARNES LORD

Security reform pitfalls

The notoriety gained by the National Security Council staff as a result of the Tower Commission's inquiry into its secret dealings with Iran will have served a useful purpose if it reopens serious and searching debate concerning the proper management of national security by the president and the Congress. As might have been predicted, however, the rush to judgment on the NSC role threatens to squander this opportunity.

What is at issue here is not simply the fate of the Reagan administration in its final years, but the viability of the presidency as an institution.

The irony of all this is that Ronald Reagan entered office with no intention of reviving the "imperial presidency" of an earlier era, and has largely honored that intention. Indeed, the very fact that the Reagan NSC was driven to expand its operational involvement in sensitive areas, far from symptomatic of a presidential staff grown overly powerful and out of control, points to the opposite problem — the inability of the White House to ensure effective implementation of its policies by the bureaucracy.

Specifically, it suggests a lack of presidential confidence both in the competence of the CIA and in the ability of the State Department to operate in a direction uncongenial to its policy predilections (which is to say, its habitual pro-Arab tilt).

Before it takes steps to impose further legislative restrictions on presidential freedom of action in national security matters, Congress needs to recognize that it is as much part of the problem as part of the solution. The experience of a decade of congressional oversight of intelligence activities has not inspired notable confidence, and the question can be raised whether granting Congress (not to speak of congressional staffs) what is in effect a veto over covert operations is compatible with our constitutional system.

Permitting some form of congressional oversight of the NSC staff and confirmation of the national security adviser would almost certainly cripple this organization and fatally weaken the president's already tenuous grip on the national security bureaucracy.

It is heartening that the Tower Commission has recognized both problems, not only recommending against congressional confirmation of the national security adviser but calling for a greatly streamlined joint congressional intelligence committee.

There are other constructive steps Congress might take to remedy current weaknesses in the management of national security. It should acknowledge the necessary and proper functions of the NSC, offer public and, where appropriate, legislative support for measures to strengthen the institutional character of the national security adviser and his staff, and change its own practices to improve executive-congressional cooperation in the development of national strategy.

Such measures would not be unprecedented. Over the past several years, Congress has taken the lead in a remarkable effort to review the organization and management of the national defense establishment and institute fundamental reforms. This effort has concentrated on strengthening the authority of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the effectiveness of the JCS staff in recognition of the powerful bureaucratic motives which have worked against genuine cooperation among the military services for many years.

In addition, Congress has moved to reform its own Pentagon oversight procedures. Among other things, it has moved from a one- to a two-year defense budget cycle and significantly reduced its micromanagement of defense programs. All of these measures had strong bipartisan support across the congressional political spectrum.

In many ways, the JCS and NSC are parallel institutions. Just as the JCS chairman will, under the reformed system, adjudicate service disputes and integrate service perspectives from the vantage point of overall national military requirements, so the NSC serves — or should serve — as adjudicator of disputes among all the national security agencies and as the principal locus for the development of a broad, integrated national security strategy.

Anyone who recognizes the reality of interservice rivalry must also recognize the reality of conflict between the historically powerful and semi-autonomous bureaucracies which make up the U.S. national security establishment as a whole. The CIA and the State and Defense departments may not be engaged in constant squabbling over resources, but their differing missions and institutional cultures preclude easy cooperation and not infrequently clash with larger national interests as viewed from the White House.

There has been increasing recognition in Congress that a JSC system relying on service consensus has made it difficult or impossible to develop a coherent national military strategy. One of the central purposes of JCS reform and related measures — including the recently enacted National Strategy Act — has been to strengthen strategic planning by the JCS and give it an enhanced role in resource allocation decisions. The same weaknesses that have plagued the JSC, however, have also been operative at the national level.

Referring to "the longstanding failure of the machinery for developing national strategy" in connection with the administration's preparations for the Reykjavik summit, Henry Kissinger recently wrote: "Negotiating positions emerge from interdepartmental contests that focus on defending entrenched positions rather than defining national goals. Relations between the State and Defense departments, rarely cordial in any administration, are at their nadir."

Most discussions of the NSC's proper role have grossly underestimated the difficulty of coordinating the work of the various agencies with national security responsibilities. Indeed, the very word "coordination" is thoroughly inadequate to describe a process which necessarily involves a logic or level of analysis qualitatively different from that of any single agency.

The need for a leading NSC role is nowhere more evident than in the general area of political military affairs. Fundamental differences between the State and Defense departments in areas such as arms control require more than an "honest broker" to resolve. They must be integrated and subordinated within an overarching strategic framework.

It is especially ironic that Congress itself, prior to the Iran episode, sought to strengthen the NSC's role in the general area of low-intensity conflict — that is, insurgency and counterinsurgency operations and counterterrorism. It did so in recognition of the severe difficulties the bureaucracy has experienced over many years in developing and implementing coherent approaches to these critically important political-military challenges.

No one believes the NSC is the optimal vehicle for conducting paramilitary or covert operations. The fact is, however, that bureaucracy abhors a vacuum. The NSC operational involvement in these areas was a natural if regrettable consequence of the failure of the bureaucracy as a whole to cope with them effectively. It can only be hoped that Congress will not forget the lesson it had seemed to learn in this regard, and settle for partisan, political responses to what must be considered a profound and enduring institutional crisis.

Carnes Lord, director of international studies at the National Institute for Public Policy in Fairfax, Va., served on the NSC staff from 1981 to 1984.